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### The Notion of Nested Narrative in Salman Rushdie's Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights

Abstract: The notion of Narratology is never a new concept in Indian Literature too. The two Indian epics, The Ramayana and The Mahabharatha are unique in their narrative structures. Indian writers of English too experimented with their narrative styles being inspired from Indian legends along with the foreign counterparts. A formal structure commonly used in narration is the story-within-stories framework. Many contemporary Indian novels have The Mahabharatha as their model as they use its frame to narrate the newly derived stories. In Indian English Drama, Girish Karnad's Nagamandala is an example of a complex narrative pattern as it adds even the audience into the story. The storytellers of the modern era explore various ways to tell a story and to present the events in its exceptional style. It is not mere thematical aspects, but the conjoining of time, space, characters and action also constitute the narration of events. This paper attempts to unleash the complex narrative strategies employed by Salman Rushdie in his novel Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights (2015). It also focuses on nested narrative employed by Rushdie in his novel. It opens up the several layers embedded in the text and analyses the role of a storyteller in the modern scenario on the grounds of the age old Scheherazade's stories.

Keywords: Affective narratology, Chinese box, Nested narrative, Parallelism, Scheherazade, Story parasite, urban fantasy.

The unpleasant contemporary reality prompts a writer to experiment with the narratives. From the very beginning of the history of literature itself, such creations have facilitated the melting of the harsh and strenuous events that engulf the creative mindset. Such an inimitable reality that unfolds in the psyche of the writer materializes in the pages of a text. The distance from the words in the text and the corresponding experience that expounds in the consciousness of the reader, determine the success of a text. Every successful writer is able to transport his/her reader into a world where the characters create magic with their mere existence. Salman Rushdie's latest offering titled as *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* (2015), takes a leaf out of the hoary *Thousand and One Nights*, the Persian collection of fairy tales. The title of the novel itself is a modern interpretation of the original one as Rushdie breaks it into years, months and days. Rushdie takes the narrative structure of the original and weaves a modern take. As Christie Yesnia writes in the article "Narrative Structure":

Narrative structure consists of the traditional parts of a story and the order in which the reader encounters them; these provide a framework for the unfolding of the story. Often represented visually as a triangle, these parts consist of exposition or beginning, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution or denouement. Narrative structure can take a variety of forms, often depending on the genre of the story. For example, a writer who wishes to build tension may begin with a dramatic flashback before visiting the initial events of a story. Further, with the development of digital narrative, a writer may provide links to other parts of a story so that the reader determines the order of events and the revelation of details.

Thus Rushdie bridges the modern with the tradition.

The novel begins, like the Arabian Nights, with a frame story, one that suggests Rushdie is trying to mix metafiction and magical realism in the same sonata. Alike Arabian Nights, it opens with a Scheherazade, a figure who acts as the narrative's prime mover, whose own story is meant to anchor the stories that multiply. It turns out to be a continuous yarn that unveils stories within stories and characters within characters. The setting of the novel is the time of 'strangenesses.' In fact, the novel bears a striking parallel to Rushdie's works like *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010). As a reader, one requires a continual suspension of disbelief while flipping through the pages. The story, which itself contains many stories nested within stories, is narrated by a future group of humans living one thousand years after the conflict.

Rushdie's narrative consists of an amazing mixture of Islamic mythology, magic, pop culture and current events that spans the one thousand and one nights. 'Affective Narratology' is the form that suits this novel. It is the culturally embedded narrative strategy and the 'story structures' are shaped and oriented by emotions. The Arabic tradition is laid as the foundation to present the modern predicament. The narrative strategy is taken from the past and more than the story, theme or characters, Rushdie subverts the narrative, in a sense that the narrative is juxtaposed with modernity.

Postmodern writers look upon the concept of Syuzhet and Fabula. Fabula is the chronological order of events, while Syuzhet is the order events are told in. The technique of 'Parallelism' is drawn upon the narrative. There is one main frame and many other shapes are being synchronized to that major frame. Rushdie can be regarded as the Scheherazade of the modern world and the myth of Scheherazade, the legendary queen of storytelling is being recreated. However, the actual story goes in an inverse form. Scheherazade told her 1,001 tales

to put off a stupid, cruel threat of death and Rushdie too once found himself under similar threat for telling an unwelcome tale.

The novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* (2015) is structured on the modern Arabian Nights for adults. Rushdie employed the technique of supernaturalism and there is war, jinnis and super humans like in the comic books. He merged the kids' comic tale mode along with the adult stuff to make it more appealing for the readers. It is a novel with multi-layers of stories and sub-stories. The underlying narrative structures remain constant, despite the apparently endless diversity of story forms and content. The plot in effect reveals the tale, often rearranging the timeline and through this, the reader 'rediscovers' the innovative events. Rushdie is a storyteller who distorts reality to suit the modern scenario. His story encapsulates several areas like history, politics, folktales, mythology. The author becomes a mythmaker out of several things, reality gets fragmented and consequently the author is made as a deity figure.

The novel contains a phantasmagoria of love stories, but these interrelated pieces serve a larger purpose. There is a shift in time and place. The novel opens in 12th-century Spain, where Rushdie imagines the love relationship between the mortal philosopher Ibn Rushd and the Dunia, who is actually a jinnia in disguise. Unlike other jinns, Dunia, the princess of the jinn liked the humans in general and one in particular. She takes human form and falls in love with the rational philosopher. She gives birth to 'hordes of babies', the 'Duniazat' or 'Dunia's tribe' – "the people of the world". The half-jinni children of Rushd and Dunia go forth and multiply akin to Scheherazade's stories. They are half-human and half jinn, all marked a trace of fairy blood and they lack ear lobes.

Salman Rushdie always had a meta-textual taste for bestowing on key characters with the variations of his names. Saleem, the narrator in *Midnight's Children* (1990), Salman, the scribe in *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Rashid, and the storyteller in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*

(1990) and in this novel too the trick places him in the exalted company of the man who challenged Islamic thinking and changed European civilization through his commentaries on Aristotle.

The main plot that is, the outermost 'Chinese box,' is constructed around a philosophical feud between the rationalist and the first secular thinker Ibn Rushd and the pious theologian. Rushdie revives the spirits of the medieval thinkers' Al-Ghazali, the ancestor of extremist fundamentalism and Ibn Rushd to conduct an inquiry into the influence of faith and reason in the contemporary world. In fact, Ghazali may be considered as a man who has a close semblance to the supreme leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who made death threats against Rushdie including fatwa calling for his assassination. This has guided to Salman Rushdie's humiliation and exile. Here, the writer's perspective gets embedded in the narrative. As Gerald Prince writes in the text *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*:

The type of point of view adopted may affect not only the kinds of events recounted and their recounting but also our processing and interpretation of them. Thus, should an external point of view be used, it is up to us to assess the feelings of the characters, the meaning of their actions, the very significance of the events presented; should a fixed internal point of view be used ...narrated is the closest to the truth. (54)

'Story telling' is a profound experience and the desire to tell stories is hung around the world so long. Humans are storytelling animals and they are the only creatures on Earth who does this strange thing. The desire for 'Once upon a time' is very deep in human beings; children often ask 'tell me a story', which is an inherent factor in human beings alone. One of the noblest and oldest of the storytellers' arts is to transmute the base stuff of life into the spun gold of the tale. Rushdie recreates a new world of storytelling and replacing it with modernity which is

rooted in the past. Through the act of storytelling, the storyteller asserts his/her own identity. This identity as a 'storyteller' explains the fact that he exists.

The novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* (2015) draws connection to Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990). The book is about Rashid, a master narrator who loves telling stories until Khattam Shud, the evil Prince of Silence and the enemy of speech, pollutes the very spring of stories itself. Rashid's son Haroun rescues his father and returns to him the gift of storytelling. A protest novel written in answer to Khomeini's fatwa, the book dramatizes in the guise of an adventure story for children, the archetypal struggles between tyrannical regimes and the human longing for freedom of expression and the liberty of human expression.

"Tell me a story" (TETN 7), Dunia, the princess of the jinnias often demanded in the novel *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights* (2015). Ibn Rushdie opined that the our stories become the true mirror of life in which all our stories contain the stories of others and are themselves contained within larger, grander narratives, the histories of our families, or homelands, or beliefs. He continued to tell Dunia stories as she demanded, and she saw him as 'anti-Scheherazade,' the exact opposite of the story teller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, her stories saved her life, for his were the tales that endangered his life rather than prolonged it. "He was a sort of anti-Scheherazade" (TETN 11), the narrator says of Ibn Rushd, who whispers rational sweet nothings in his lover's ear as pillow talk, "her stories saved her life, while his put his life in danger (TETN 12)," the nod to Rushdie's own fatwa, inciting *The Satanic Verses* (1998) echoing loud and clear pointing to the fact that "One man's absolute belief is another man's fairy tale" (TETN 220)

One of the characters Blue Yasmeen too narrates fairy tales. She is a spoken-word artist, remembers her dead father and spins on-stage stories with style and passion. "We are all trapped in stories" (TETN 112), she said, just as her father used to say:



Each of us the prisoner of our own solipsistic narrative, each family the captive of the family story, each community locked within its own tale of itself, each people the victims of their own versions of history. (TETN 112)

Blue Yasmeen refers to a 'story parasite' that has spread across the Lam Mountains among the Unyaza people. It is said that the story parasite gets into the children and they often demand stories and the elders think to end this disease by stopping the ear with mud. This is one of the fables shaped by Rushdie in order to tell how stories are important to us as human beings.

Salman Rushdie in the *The New Yorker* writes:

Stories told against death, to civilize a barbarian... And at the foot of the marital bed sat Scheherazade's sister, her perfect audience, asking for one more story, and then one more, and then yet another.

Scheherazade civilized the King through her stories and hence storytelling makes readers better people. Rushdie has made the task of re-packaging the heritage enormously challenging. The act of storytelling keeps a narrator alive which cements his existence.

The linked narratives depict what the novel calls 'The War of the Worlds' and the 'Time of Strangeness'. It is drawn on the Islamic mythology of the jinn, who are the genies of our popular culture. They are supernatural creatures made of 'smokeless fire' who live in a parallel universe veiled off from the earth. Rushdie speaks in an interview: "Jinns are pre-Islamic pagan creatures, they don't believe in God. The concept of God is a weird idea to them, as the jinn are to us." They just want to cause trouble among humans and are not interested about the ideas between good and evil. While the novel is a spectacle of the fabulous, it is also a cemetery for the theocratic follies of the humanity. Rushdie is in a way satirizes the very nature of the humans who have a tendency to succumb easily to the darker side.

The concept of 'satire' is masquerading as a fairy tale. There is nothing real about it on the surface as all the reality is hidden below the story; the top layer is purely magical. Like the



fairy tales, it all comes down ultimately to a battle between good and evil. Al Ghazali is made to look as a satirical character parallel to the Muslim leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who is against the freedom of expression. He satirizes the age which is plunged into unreason. The initial page picturizes “The sleep of reason brings forth monsters,” like the four evil jinns who emerged from the slits to destruct the earthly world of human existence.

There is some brilliant satirizing of politics, totalitarianism, world financial institutions and so on and, on a more intimate level, of love, sex, and human relationships in general. Manifestations that are more surreal are being incorporated into the novel. There are surreal situations, characters and brooding humour.

In a Romanian village a woman started laying eggs. In a French town the citizenry began turning into rhinoceroses. Old Irish people took to living in rubbish bins. A Belgian man looked into a mirror and saw the back of his head reflected in it. A Russian official lost his nose and then saw it walking around St Petersburg by itself. A narrow cloud sliced across a full moon and a Spanish lady gazing up at it felt a sharp pain as a razor blade cut her eyeball in half and the vitreous humour, the gelatinous matter filling the space between the lens and the retina, flowed out. Ants crawled out of a hole in a man's palm. (TETN 92)

Rushdie fabricated this novel as a fantastic fable about colliding worlds. The coinage ‘urban fantasy’ can be elucidated by saying that the jinn's off-springs were living in our world rather than in Peristan, the fairyland. It is the story of Dunia, the great jinnia princess who made her way simultaneously to the two worlds. She is the princess of the fairyland Peristan. Frontiers are broken the slits between the world and Peristan is reopened. As the veil is wrecked, the evil ones too get through the slits causing catastrophe. With is customary political wit, Rushdie makes the dark jinns denoting Taliban and as well as the ideas of Islamic state and culture.

Two Years Eight Months and Twenty Eight Nights (2015) takes a step beyond Rushdie's typical magic-realism and uses fantasy as a clever lens to look into social reality. The narrative voice tells the reader, "...to tell a story about the past is to tell a story about the present. To recount a fantasy, a story of the imaginary, is also a way of recounting a tale about the actual" (TETN 207). The novel can be viewed as the representation of the 'Kaliyuga', where the battle happens with one's self. The 'War of the Worlds' is the war made in the human heart between good and the evil. Here Rushdie best approaches the darker subjects and intricacies with black humour, which resonates the readers to be aware of this transforming world, which is changing with bewildering, speed. Even though he projects into the future, the concerns of the past are taken into the present.

Thus through the experimentation of the narrative framework, Salman Rushdie has wonderfully woven the intricacies of the modern world. His effective use of the traditional pattern of storytelling, elements of satire and black humour, characters having multiple shades and apologue ably establishes the notion of Rushdie as a master storyteller.

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